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# Changing perceptions through hospitality

*How PCH Hotels have reinvigorated Alabama meeting destinations*

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Most hotels exist to make money. Point Clear Holdings (PCH) properties and parent company Retirement Systems of Alabama (RSA) have a grander mission.

“Our company is based on the premise of making Alabama a better place to work, live and play,” says Karyl B. Hanisch, senior sales manager of PCH’s The Battle House and Renaissance Riverview Plaza Hotel in Mobile, Ala.

That vision comes from Chief Executive Officer Dr. David Bronner who, as head of RSA, was looking for the best way to manage and diversify the assets of the state’s pension fund. His solution: to build a compelling reason for people to visit Alabama. A portion of revenues generated by RSA holdings goes into the pensions received by Alabama teachers, police officers and other state employees. Bronner reasoned a stronger Alabama economy would result in a stronger retirement fund for its workers.

The first project Bronner developed was the **Robert Trent Jones (RTJ) Golf Trail**, a massive collection of 28 championship-quality golf courses with a combined 468 holes at 11 different locations. Each course is designed to support multiple levels of play and highlight the natural beauty of Alabama’s diverse landscape. It’s been called “some of the best public golf on earth” by The New York Times, and its affordable greens fees (\$43-\$64 for most courses) have attracted visitors from all over.

“It used to be when the Department of Tourism surveyed people from England and said ‘Alabama,’ they’d say ‘civil rights,’” says Joe Saling, PCH’s area director of sales and marketing. “Now they say ‘golf.’”

When the **RTJ Golf Trail** opened in 2005, tourism increased markedly. Golf Digest ranked it No. 8 in the world for quality and No. 1 in the world for value. But golfers coming off the course were staying at limited service properties that weren’t of the same high quality.

“[Dr. Bronner] was getting rave reviews about the golf experience, but reports of how bad the hotel experience was,” Saling says. “He approached other companies about building hotels, but they weren’t on the same page, so he said, ‘We’ll just build or acquire our own

hotels.”

Jessica Methier, group sales manager of the Renaissance Montgomery Hotel and Spa at the Convention Center, says PCH properties were designed to be “luxury properties, but without a luxury price tag.” Each has an impressive inventory of meeting space and group amenities. Although aligned with the Marriott and Renaissance brands, each hotel maintains a unique identity. Hotels located in the historic cities of Montgomery and Mobile also have sparked downtown revitalization efforts, anchoring new businesses, entertainment venues, restaurants and retail developments.

Saling says, “From Dr. Bronner, the message we have is that [making money] is important, but it’s just as important that we change or improve people’s views of the state of Alabama.”

To that end, Methier says convention sales representatives always start by asking if meeting planners have been to Alabama. “If they say ‘yes,’ we say, ‘Well, forget anything you remember.’”

PCH manages eight properties throughout the state, including two of Marriott’s most historic hotels. Here’s an overview of what each Alabama location has to offer meeting and event planners:

Mobile

The lobby and grand hallways of [The Battle House, A Renaissance Hotel](#), are filled with the scent of gardenias. That’s one of many touches that remind visitors of the historic hotel’s stately southern past. Built in 1852, it dominated the city’s social scene for more than 100 years, hosting Mardi Gras parties and high-society cotillions as well as presidents and celebrities. The property reopened in 2007 after completing a two-year, \$200 million renovation project that restored the building’s plasterwork, ornate art glass skylights, elegant guest rooms and meeting space. The renovation also added the RSA Battle House Tower, the tallest building on the Gulf Coast.

There are 238 guest rooms. Most people request the historic rooms, but aside from the new rooms being a little bigger and having patios, there is no substantial difference between the two. All are decorated in rich ruby, peacock blue and gold tones and manage to feel cozy, yet opulent. If you have VIPs, check out the Governor’s Suite, with its exposed brick gathering space, game room, bar, grand piano and sleeping rooms, and the Presidential Suite, which has all that plus a private patio with a fountain and Jacuzzi. A full-service, European-style spa recently opened.

The hotel has a total of 27,000 square feet of meeting space. The modern Moonlight Ballroom (capacity: 956) has a striking scalloped ceiling with adjustable lighting and an enormous retractable screen, frequently used for telecasts and press conferences. Satellite hookups on the loading docks connect directly to the ballroom, eliminating the need to run wires upstairs. The focus of the ornate Crystal Ballroom (capacity: 310) is its grand staircase and colorful walls, which are decorated with murals of the city’s history and intricate plaster moldings. Smaller groups may take advantage of the property’s historic meeting rooms, rooftop patio space, restaurants and lounges for meetings or events.

A few blocks away, the 374-room [Renaissance Riverview Plaza Hotel](#) overlooks the Mobile River. The nautical-themed hotel has a cruise-ship vibe which is reinforced by the twinkling ceiling and wavy glass panels of its Fathoms Lounge, and pre-recorded elevator greetings which tell guests which “deck” they’re on. The Governor’s and Presidential suites have nautical touches like brass telescopes as well as cozy gathering and gaming areas for entertaining, private meals or intimate meetings. Portable guest room telephones work anywhere on property — a boon to planners if personal cell reception is spotty.

The property has a total of 46,000 square feet of meeting space, including 18 meeting rooms (ranging in size from 400 to 10,086 square feet) with floor-to-ceiling windows. A 14,000-sq. ft. outdoor event space overlooks the river. The Cyber Café is an offbeat, high-tech event venue for breakouts and small meetings.

If you have a large group housed in both the Riverview Plaza and the Battle House, sales reps recommend you plan all the meetings in one and the evening activities in the other to shake things up. If you need significant exhibit space, the hotel is connected to the 300,000-sq. ft. Arthur R. Outlaw Convention Center.

Two cruise lines, Carnival and Holiday, depart from Mobile, giving planners the option of adding a pre- or post-event cruise to the agenda. The Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail's Magnolia Grove courses are a 20-minute drive from the city. Along the way, planners will find historic museums, restaurants and mansions, which may be booked for meal functions or private events.

**Point Clear**

If your aim is to pamper attendees in an exclusive atmosphere, the 405-room [Grand Hotel Marriott Resort, Golf Club & Spa](#) in Point Clear is a phenomenal option. Built in 1847, the historic resort sits on 550 secluded acres along Mobile Bay. Located halfway between Mobile and Gulf Shores, Ala., it is served by both Mobile and Pensacola airports, but primarily is a drive-in destination.

The rooms and public areas off the circular main building have a hunting lodge feel with exposed wooden beams and hardwood floors. Instead of deer heads, however, guests will find massive art installations organized by local artist Nall, who creates and commissions artwork for all the PCH properties. Conference center meeting rooms open out onto an expansive event lawn and beach area, where planners can create luaus and launch water-bound excursions. A boardwalk connects the conference center to outdoor venues, restaurants and guest rooms. From Julep Point, a popular outdoor band shell dating from the 1920s, guests can see Mobile and Gulf Shores.

There is a total of 35,500 square feet of meeting space on property, including the contemporary 10,000-sq. ft. Grand Ballroom (capacity: 1,000), the circular Sky Lounge (capacity: 100) and the intimate Card Room (capacity: 50). Bucky's Birdcage Lounge is named for one of the Grand's legendary employees who remembered the name of every guest he spoke with and had a famous recipe for mint juleps. It's a popular spot to unwind, watch dolphins frolic through deep blue waters, and listen to live music.

The resort has a full range of recreational options guest may enjoy free of charge. Amenities include a marina, bike and kayak rentals, sailing lessons, historic home tours, pool and beach areas, and a croquet lawn. "One thing we try to do is not nickel and dime our guests," says Sales Manager Aaron Watz. "Once you check in, you don't have to pay for water, parking or the Internet. You can charter a fishing trip, or your attendees can pick up bait and a pole and fish off the pier for free."

There is also a 20,000-sq. ft. spa, considered one of Marriott's best. Its quiet room is mesmerizing, filled with graceful lounge chairs and understated, candlelit mosaic tile work. A golf cart ride away is the Lakewood Golf Course, home of the Dogwood and the Azalea courses. The clubhouse also has a room for post-tournament parties and on-site dining.

If you want a change of scenery, resort shuttles can transport attendees to the funky town or Fairhope, a socialist colony where chain stores are not allowed and people don't own land (they hold 99-year leases). The colorful village has restaurants, art galleries and boutiques.

**Montgomery and Prattville**

The [Renaissance Montgomery Hotel & Spa at the Convention Center](#) is the newest addition to the PCH family. Its design was inspired by The Plaza Hotel in New York, but it has a high-tech edge over that classic building in its 73,000+-sq. ft. convention center (capacity: 10,360) and adjacent 1,800-seat performing arts center, which hosts touring Broadway shows, comedians and popular musical acts. The hotel tower has an additional 16 breakout rooms and a 14,000-sq. ft. grand ballroom (capacity: 1,989). Like the Riverview Plaza, mobile guest room telephones work anywhere on property.

The hotel's artwork is arranged to give visitors the feeling of walking through an art gallery as they move through corridors to and from the convention center, the European spa building and restaurant/lounges. Its 342 rooms and 26 luxury suites are wired to allow planners to send messages to attendees via in-room flat panel televisions, and the décor is fresh and whimsical, with floor to ceiling windows covered by poppy-print sheers and white blackout curtains. The pool area is on the roof, where planners can arrange functions around the cabana bar or in a separate gathering area.

Everything about the property seems grand, from its lobby to its state-of-the-art theater. "We wanted to introduce an element of entertainment in this property," Group Sales Manager Jessica Methier says. "There's such culture and history in this town, we wanted it to be a reflection of that." In particular, the artwork Nall has created or selected for this hotel focuses on Montgomery's role as the capital city and its civil rights legacy.

Despite the number of government workers, downtown Montgomery used to be a ghost town at night. The opening of the hotel in February 2008 **changed all that**. Now, locals flock to its theater and restaurant, The House, which has a private dining room for 20. Across the street, the Alleyway Project (also called Grocer's Alley), a collection of shops, bars, restaurants and lofts modeled after New Orleans' French Quarter, is scheduled to open in January 2009. Other entertainment options include Montgomery Biscuit baseball games, Alabama Shakespeare performances, civil rights tours and The Legends at Capitol Hill Golf Club, which is less than 10 minutes away in Prattville.

The golf club is adjacent to the **Montgomery Prattville Hotel & Conference Center at Capitol Hill**, which has 95 rooms, two eight-room golf villas, and a 10,000-sq. ft. Presidential Cottage with five luxury suites and garden event space. The villas and cottage are popular with incentive groups, corporate retreats and social events.

Groups of 200 and less have ample meeting and breakout space in the hotel's conference center, which has a 9,750-sq. ft. ballroom and covered patio event space. The property also frequently hosts larger groups (300-550) not requiring rooms.

The Capitol Hill Golf Club has the reputation of having some of the best courses on the RTJ Golf Trail: the Judge, the Senator and the Legislator. Guest rooms, the Oak Tavern restaurant and meeting spaces have advantageous views of these undulating greens, which resemble a verdant ocean.

**Auburn-Opelika**

**Auburn Marriott Opelika Hotel & Conference Center at Grand National** embraces its rustic setting, offering guests nature trails, fishing excursions and watersports on Saugahatchee Lake. Its proximity to Atlanta (90 miles) attracts both corporate and leisure groups. General Manager Jay Prater received the 2008 Marriott General Manger of the Year Award. The Alabama Hospitality Association named Executive Chef Pete Idsall Alabama's 2007 Top Chef of the Year.

The property has 114 guest rooms, 15 suites and 15,000 square feet of meeting space, including a 4,704-sq. ft. ballroom (capacity: 500) and a 96-seat amphitheater. Pre-function space opens out onto a patio and massive event lawn, which is bordered by the pool area and a covered, lakeside picnic area. Each guest room has a private balcony overlooking the lake.

On-site dining options include the Lakeview Room and the Fairways Lounge. The Spot, a private pool and poker room, has an "emergency" hotline to the Fairways' bartender. Auburn is only 10 miles away, which makes it easy for attendees to take advantage of the college town's nightlife. Auburn University has many amenities for groups, including the Auburn Leadership Institute, an outdoor ropes course, a raptor center and indoor/outdoor tennis courts. The nearby village of Waverly is a popular dine-around location.

Golf Digest named Auburn-Opelika the No. 1 Golf City in the United States, primarily because it's home to the Grand National Golf Club. The club has two 18-hole courses: Links and Lakes. If attendees don't have time to fit in a full round of golf, an 18-hole putting

course outside the main lobby of the hotel offers a quick fix. The clubhouse has an expansive patio for post-tournament celebrations.

**Birmingham**

Surrounded by a European-style hamlet of shops, residences and restaurants (opening early 2009), The [Renaissance Ross Bridge Golf Resort & Spa](#) in Hoover looms over the third-longest golf course in the world. The hotel resembles a castle in the Scottish Highlands, and it has several Scottish-themed touches. An hour prior to sundown, a bagpiper circles the estate, serenading guests on the golf course, pool patio and verandas. Wake up calls feature pipe and drum music, and the Ross family tartan is featured throughout the property.

The resort has 259 rooms and a 12,000-sq. ft. full-service luxury spa. There is a total of 20,000 square feet of meeting space, including the 9,648-sq. ft. Hoover Ballroom, which has a capacity of 1,200 and opens out onto an outdoor terrace. Brock’s restaurant has a private dining room for 12 and patio dining.

Unlike other PCH properties, the RTJ Golf Trail clubhouse is attached to the resort. The Ross Bridge course was designed for tournament play. The architect was fond of saying, “God makes golf courses. Men just discover them,” but a lot of thought went into the course layout, which encircles two man-made lakes connected by an 80-ft. waterfall and crosses a central point five times. Golf carts are equipped with GPS systems and monitors that can broadcast messages from the clubhouse as well as tournament leader boards.

**Florence**

Music is a recurring theme at the [Marriott Shoals Hotel & Spa](#). Artists such as Little Richard, Cher and Crystal Gayle have recorded albums at Muscle Shoals’ famous recording studio, and those songs form the basis of the hotel’s ambient music soundtrack. Local backup singers The Swampers, immortalized by a lyric in Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Sweet Home Alabama,” occasionally perform in the hotel’s Swampers Lounge.

Despite its remote location, the area has a rich history: It is home to both Helen Keller and W.C. Handy, the “Father of the Blues.” The area also is referred to as a sportsman’s paradise because of its rich fishing, hunting, golf and watersports opportunities. The outdoorsy theme is repeated in the décor of the hotel’s 193 guest rooms and seven suites, which all have private balconies and river views. The rooms also overlook the River Heritage Park, which has a covered pavilion, interactive fountain and outdoor amphitheater.

The Landrum Room, a cozy boardroom for 25 with pre-function space, leather chairs, chandeliers and a built-in bar, is named for a local photographer whose images grace the walls of the hotel’s meeting spaces. The hotel tower also has three breakout rooms (capacity: 75-100), an amphitheater (capacity: 200) and two hospitality/governor’s suites (capacity: 40). In the 30,000-sq. ft. conference center, there is an 11,840-sq. ft. ballroom (capacity: 2,000), and the 3,240-sq. ft. Singing River room (capacity: 500), which opens out to a 3,150-sq. ft. terrace.

On-site dining is available at the Bronzeback Café as well as the 360 Grille, a revolving restaurant that provides panoramic views of the region. Also on the resort campus is a 6,000-sq. ft. European-style full-service spa, the Florence/Lauderdale Tourism and Visitors Center and the Florence Chamber of Commerce office.

The Shoals has two 18-hole championship courses, the Fighting Joe and the Schoolmaster, named for President Woodrow Wilson. Both are long courses, over 8,000 yards, and offer spectacular views of the Tennessee River.

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